

WORKER-INITIATED VIOLENCE: PREVENTION STRATEGIES

IN PARK AND RECREATION DEPARTMENTS

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Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

December 2002

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Hutchinson, Tamara Germaine, Worker-initiated violence: Prevention strategies in park and recreation departments. Master of Science (Recreation and Leisure Studies), December 2002, 29 pp., 1 table, references, 22 titles.

Workplace violence infects many organizations. This descriptive study assesses the extent to which Texas park and recreation departments institute policies and procedures for preventing worker-initiated violence. Thirty directors from local park and recreation departments were interviewed by telephone and asked to identify whether their departments used specific prevention strategies to thwart instances of worker-initiated violence. The findings reveal few prevention strategies being used and suggest a need for park and recreation managers to increase their awareness and take a more proactive approach to violence prevention.

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## INTRODUCTION

While no one wants to suspect coworkers of untoward behavior, the fact remains that worker-initiated violence does take place and it is important to recognize the potential for this classification of violence to infiltrate the workplace. Consider the following examples: a terminated Parks Department employee in Ft. Lauderdale, killed five former coworkers, critically wounded a sixth, then committed suicide (Clary, 1996), and a Philadelphia Streets Department worker shot and killed two supervisors (“City Worker,” 1998).

Workplace violence can be extremely costly to employers in terms of financial and legal costs, such as cleaning up the office following an incident, lost productivity while injured workers recuperate, lawsuits, and insurance (Bensimon, 1996). The 1996 Workplace Violence Research Institute estimated the annual costs of workplace violence to be approximately \$35.4 billion in 1995 (Kaufer & Mattman, 1998). The National Council on Compensation Insurance Inc. indicated that there were 6,000 violence-related workers’ compensation claims filed during 1995, which cost employers \$126 million in medical and indemnity benefits (National Council on Compensation Insurance Inc. [NCCI], n.d.). Furthermore, there may also be significant psychological ramifications for employees who worked closely with and trusted a coworker found to be capable of egregious offenses. Obviously, the cost of workplace violence in human and financial terms is high, and well worth the expense of having violence prevention plans in place. Little has been published about violence in the ranks of municipal government, specifically parks and recreation departments; yet, the problem is present.

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which park and recreation departments use prevention strategies to minimize worker-initiated violence in their areas and facilities. This investigation focuses on worker-initiated acts of violence, regardless of the intended victim. That does not restrict violent acts to only those perpetrated on other employers, nor does it restrict the setting to only the workplaces, although it does restrict it to work-related issues. An example of worker-initiated violence not occurring in the workplace is a recreation worker who goes to a patron's home and threatens the patron because of a conflict that took place at the recreation center.

What can managers do to protect employees and employers alike from the tragedies and high costs of worker-initiated violence? "The purpose of a preventative strategy is to recognize, detect, and address potentially violent situations before they escalate into tragedy" (Nicoletti & Spooner, 1996, p. 268). Labig (1995) pointed out that the hiring process offers a natural opportunity to evaluate a person's likelihood of becoming violent. The initial step in gaining employment is completing an application. "Preemployment screening of prospective employees can be an effective means of preventing an external threat from becoming an internal threat, thus reducing the probability of workplace violence" (Kuzmits, 1992, as cited in VandenBos and Bulatao, 1996, p. 288-289). By carefully reviewing of all of the information provided on applications, directors can detect any gaps in job histories (Martucci & Clemow, 1994/95; Feliu, 1994/95). In a study of 35 Illinois' Park District directors, Burgoyne (1996) found that 14% ( $n=5$ ) did not use an application form, thus missing the opportunity to identify falsified information.

Conducting reference checks may yield information that may suggest a propensity for violence. Criminal background checks need to be job-related, and the background check policy should be legally defensible (Connerley, Arvey, & Bernardy, 2001). Burgoyne (1996) found 89% ( $n=31$ ) of the park and recreation directors in her sample conducted reference checks for certain positions in the department, while 69% ( $n=24$ ) had completed reference checks for all positions in the department. She found that 66% ( $n=23$ ) of her sample checked records, with only 6% ( $n=2$ ) completing record checks for all jobs. This left a number of employees working who may have had questionable backgrounds, thus exposing employers to potential liabilities.

Psychological testing is another strategy or pre-employment screening; one that has proven controversial. Psychological tests may not sufficiently measure how a person will behave (Labig, 1995), and there is no proven effectiveness to these tests (Weisberg, 1994). Some states consider psychological tests illegal. An alternative to psychological testing may be incorporated into the interview process. Human resource personnel recommend formulating scenario-type hypothetical questions to sort out applicants who may have difficulty dealing with anger management or temper control issues (Bush & O'Shea, 1996). Burgoyne (1996) found that 91% ( $n=32$ ) of the directors she spoke with conducted interviews with prospective employees, but only 49% ( $n=17$ ) considered the applicants' potential for violence during the interview.

There are also prevention strategies to implement once applicants are hired. Maintaining a safe and secure workplace is critical to the well being of any organization. Threats of violence can originate both within and outside of an organization; therefore,

efforts used to prevent violence should include internal and external security measures (Bush & O'Shea, 1996). Some security measures might include limiting access to all areas, hiring security guards, using closed circuit televisions, carefully screening potential employees, implementing employee assistance programs, and efficiently dealing with employee grievances (Baron, 2000). Another strategy is to impose a policy forbidding employees from bringing weapons to the workplace (Stone, 1995). Clear, strong, fair, and consistent policies should be established for a variety of situations, such as, harassment, filing grievances, security measures, and open communication (Labig, 1995; Miller, 1999). One method to combat violence before it begins is to include a zero-tolerance policy indicating that any act or threat of violence will not be tolerated and the consequences for violating the policy will be severe and could result in termination (Kuzmitz, 1992; Weisberg, 1994; Stone, 1995). Not everyone embraces the concept of zero-tolerance, however. Denenberg and Braverman (1999) suggested that policies should take levels of severity into consideration when issuing punishment. The policy should specify reporting procedures, including whom employees should report to, and ensure the confidentiality of the employee doing the reporting (Weisberg, 1994; Stone, 1995).

Poor policy development will lead to an organization plagued with problems, while well-developed policies define the procedures for responding to problematic situations (Labig, 1995). Burgoyne (1996) suggests the importance of a written commitment to a safe workplace. Her findings identified that 86% ( $n=30$ ) of the park district directors affirmed they gave their employees a policy and procedures manual, but

only 77% ( $n=27$ ) included a written commitment to a safe workplace, and only 46% ( $n=16$ ) had policies regarding employees who commit violence in the workplace.

Comprehensive training programs also have the potential to reduce critical incidents in the workplace. Labig (1995) suggests managing threats and risks before they occur; yet, employees need to know what to look for. Stone (1995) encouraged organizations to support employees who may be experiencing difficulty by training all employees to recognize and report warning signs, such as changes in mood or demeanor. Burgoyne's (1996) research indicated that almost a quarter ( $n=26$ ) of the directors in her sample offered in-house training to enhance employees' knowledge, but only 17% ( $n=6$ ) offered training specifically on understanding potential tendencies for violence in their coworkers, leaving many employees untrained in facing violent coworkers. Training programs should "address prediction of the problem, prevention, which includes training of personnel to handle potentially violent situations, and the potential trauma of such situations" (Baron, 2000, p. 121). Employee training should include exercises in conflict resolution and nonviolent response techniques to reduce workplace conflicts (Stone, 1995). A vital step in preventing an incident of worker-initiated violence from erupting within an organization is to investigate any reports of threats or violence in a timely manner (Kuznitz, 1992; Weisberg, 1994).

Employee assistance plans (EAPs) are "a valuable outlet for those who might otherwise resort to violence to communicate real or perceived grievances" (Labig, 1995, p. 88). Burgoyne's (1996) research indicated that one third ( $n=23$ ) of the park districts interviewed offered employee assistance programs to their employees. Organizations



offer EAPs to serve as a transitional resource for employees who have been terminated or laid off (Flannery, 1995). Since the target of violence is often the person responsible for carrying out the termination, it is wise to handle the situation with discretion (Stone, 1995). Baron (2000) alleged that organizations must have policies in place concerning termination and stressed the importance of training programs that educate employees in proper termination techniques. Employers should never surprise an individual with a termination notice, and should follow a systematic approach to documentation, especially when it may lead to terminating an employee (Labig, 1995). Furthermore, James Alan Fox of Northeastern University does not recommend terminating employees on Fridays. Fox suggests that, rather than cooling off over the weekend, a Friday termination actually could heighten an employee's anger and frustration since managers and coworkers may not be available to talk with the terminated employee or provide more information regarding the termination (Bensimon, 1994). In addition, weekends are not conducive to beginning a new job search (Bensimon, 1994). Many prevention strategies are available, as suggested by the literature, yet few have been empirically tested; therefore, this study seeks to examine the extent to which prevention strategies are currently employed by Texas park and recreation directors.

## METHODS

Municipal and county public park and recreation agencies listed in the 2001 Texas Park and Recreation Society (TRAPS) membership directory were used as the sampling frame ( $N=115$ ) in this descriptive research study. Agencies such as educational institutions, private recreation providers, and hospitals were excluded from the sample. A simple random sample of 25% of the population of agencies ( $n=30$ ) was drawn. Of the agencies selected, data were collected from persons in the position of directors of parks and recreation or their proxies. The unit of analysis was directors of parks and recreation.

Faculty and an attorney from a large state university reviewed and offered recommendations for revisions to the initial instrument. Directors of three agencies not falling into the sample were interviewed by telephone as part of the pilot test to further clarify the comprehensibility of each item. Recommendations emanating from the pilot test included differentiating between terminology used in the instrument, and breaking multi-part questions into individual questions to ease responses.

Directors received a cover letter stating the purpose of the study and requesting their voluntary participation. The letter informed directors that the researcher would telephone them to schedule an appointment for the telephone interview. After at least four attempts by telephone, the researcher utilized electronic mail to send copies of the cover letter to directors and request their participation in the study. At the directors' request, the researcher faxed another copy of the letter to a few directors. Two directors requested a copy of the instrument prior to participating in the telephone interview and

the researcher sent the instrument via electronic mail. Each director was interviewed over the telephone and consented to having the conversation recorded. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. The structured interviews lasted approximately 35-40 minutes, with a range of between 20 minutes, and one hour and 20 minutes. Due to time constraints, one director's interview was conducted during two consecutive days.

The instrument was arranged primarily in an open-ended format and broken into four sections, three of which were used for this study: pre-employment, post-employment, and demographics. The open-ended format allowed directors the opportunity to further clarify responses and share specific techniques and strategies they have employed relating to the prevention of worker-initiated violence. In the pre-employment and post-employment sections, directors were asked if their agency and/or departments employed each of the 33 prevention strategies indicated in Table 1.

Directors were asked to respond with either "yes," "no," or "don't know." Affirmative responses led to open-ended questions regarding how, what, or why the information would be used. Sample questions included: "Does your agency have one application that all applicants are required to complete? If yes, does your agency verify the information on the form (education, past work experience, etc.)?" Similar questions were used to explore record checks, psychological testing, interview techniques, drug testing, education and training, employee assistance, security measures, and termination/lay-off procedures. A description of workers with violent tendencies preceded two questions on training: "Is your interviewing staff trained to look for these types of characteristics?" "Are all staff members trained to look for these types of characteristics in their daily

interactions with coworkers?” This description included people withdrawn from relationships with coworkers, having a fondness toward violent films, books, and television shows, having a fascination with weapons, or loners appearing guarded, defensive and hostile.

Directors were asked an open-ended question at the beginning and again at the end of the interview, “Tell me, in your own words, to what extent do you think your agency is prepared to deal with worker-initiated violence.” Directors also supplied demographic information. Interviewee information included gender, age (by decade), highest level of education obtained and in what field, whether they have a degree in parks and recreation, number of years in the field, number of years in their organization, number of years in current position, and if they had attended any training on workplace violence. Agency information included the amount of the department’s annual operating budget, size of population served by agency, number of full-time, part-time, and seasonal employees, whether department has unions, number of people in human resources (HR) department, and the role HR plays in preventing and reacting to violence. Questions about the department’s history with violence included whether the department knew of employees with violent tendencies, whether the department had ever had employees who committed violence in the workplace, at whom the violence was directed, and steps taken by the agency to resolve the situation and assist employees after the incident.

## RESULTS

In this study, thirty Texas park and recreation directors or their designees (referred to hereafter as directors) were interviewed by telephone to determine what prevention strategies they employ to reduce the incidence of worker-initiated violence in their work locales. Twenty-five park and recreation directors (83%), and five human resources professionals (17%), whom the respective directors asked to serve as proxies, participated in the interview. Almost half of the directors (47%;  $n=14$ ) were in their fifties, one third (33%;  $n=10$ ) were in their forties, and one-fifth (20%;  $n=6$ ) were in their twenties. Respondents had been in their profession an average of 21 years. The number of years directors have been employed with their agencies ranged from one to 29 years with over half (57%;  $n=17$ ) of the respondents having been with their agency for more than ten years. Male respondents (67%;  $n=20$ ) outnumbered females (33%;  $n=10$ ) by exactly two to one. Three directors (10%) held high school diplomas, while 14 (47%) obtained either an associates or bachelors degree. The remaining 13 (43%) had acquired a masters degree. Exactly half of the directors (50%;  $n=15$ ) had at least one degree specifically in park and recreation.

The operating budgets for participating agencies varied from \$240,000 to over \$61 million, with half of the agencies (50%;  $n=15$ ) receiving between \$1.4 and \$5 million annually. Two agencies (7%) spent over \$20 million, while three agencies (10%) operated with \$500,000 or less. The number of full-time employees in responding agencies ranged from two to 2000 employees. Seventy-six percent ( $n=23$ ) of respondents employed fewer than 100 full-time employees. The populations served by the agencies

ranged from 8,500 to 1.5 million citizens. Twenty-three agencies (77%) reported populations of fewer than 100,000 people, and two agencies (7%) reported populations of over one million people.

The instrument contained 33 items relating to strategies that might prevent worker-initiated violence (see Table 1). Directors reported using from 13 to 24 of these strategies. The mean for the distribution of prevention strategies was 19; the median, 19; the mode, 21. Some of the more commonly used strategies included using a standard employment application, asking the same questions to all applicants for the same position, conducting thorough background and reference checks, drug testing applicants and employees, and providing all employees with a policies and procedures manual purportedly to ensure that they are aware of the guidelines. Some of the less common strategies included instituting security measures, such as panic buttons and surveillance cameras, and providing mandatory training on the topic of workplace violence, from recognizing signs of troubled coworkers to reporting procedures. One director reported that his department uses psychological testing prior to employment and has escorts accompany employees to their vehicles after dark. Another director acknowledged that his department terminates employees on a specific day of the week.

As shown in Table 1, all of the directors (100%;  $n=30$ ) had an application form that all applicants were required to complete. Twenty-five (84%) responded that their agencies verify the information given on the forms. There were some inconsistencies in the responses, however. Some employers checked prior work history, or educational experience, but not necessarily both. A few respondents pointed out that the hiring

supervisor determined whether to verify the information or not. The nature of the vacant position also affected whether departments verified background information. For example, a child care worker's background may be scrutinized more carefully than that of an introductory position for ground maintenance. All except one agency checked references; 67% ( $n=20$ ) of which do so for all positions. A few directors responded that they check references in most cases, but not always with temporary or part time/seasonal employees, and sometimes the decision to check references is left up to the person doing the hiring. When asked why their agencies checked references, the responses varied, but most stated the need to check for falsified information and confirm accurate background information as the main reason.

The category of record checks was divided into three sections: criminal histories, driving records, and credit checks. Twenty-eight (93%) directors responded that they check criminal histories, while 97% ( $n=29$ ) stated that they examine driving records, and five (17%) responded that their agencies utilize credit histories as a means for determining employability. The reasons given for conducting these checks included job-relatedness (i.e. use of city credit card, primary drivers, and those with commercial drivers' licenses), and consistent treatment of all employees. In general, the most important reasons given were liability issues and safety concerns for both employees and citizens, followed closely by examining the application for missing or falsified information.

Only one director stated that the agency uses psychological testing for applicants. In this case, it is used for law enforcement officers, such as park rangers, to get a clearer picture of the applicant, since their jobs will require them to carry guns.

All 30 directors stated that their agencies interview applicants, with 24 directors (80%) identifying park and recreation staff as the primary interviewers for staffing their departments. Other persons involved with the interview process included human resource personnel, heads of other departments, citizens, and, occasionally, staff from other park and recreation departments. When asked what techniques, if any, they used to assess violent tendencies, 50% ( $n=15$ ) responded that they did not look specifically for violent tendencies during the interview. Twelve directors (40%) indicated that they ask hypothetical scenario-type questions to see how potential employees would react in given situations. Two directors (7%) declared that they use role-playing, but for the purpose of judging personalities and gauging customer service, as opposed to looking for violent tendencies. One director indicated using a very informal style of interviewing, in which the director invites applicants into the office “to chat.” In hiring for supervisory positions, one city reportedly sets up stressful days of interviewing to see how the applicant will react under pressure.

All except one (97%) of the participating agencies conducted drug testing prior to hiring employees, with most stating that hiring is contingent upon passing the drug tests. Of the agencies that conducted drug tests before hiring, 25 (83%) conducted the tests for all positions. Those agencies that did not test for all positions explained that testing was required only for drivers, employees with commercial drivers’ licenses, full-time



employees, and law enforcement positions. Twenty-eight (93%) agencies admittedly conduct drug testing after applicants are hired. Thirteen (43%) persons stated that testing is done randomly and following an accident or incident. One director reported that their policy requires a certain number of random samplings done per year, while another director mandated testing employees who have been out on medical leave before allowing the employees to return to work. Another reason for conducting drug tests included employees exhibiting suspicious behavior on the job. The consequences for failing a drug test were many. Most discipline measures depended on the severity of the circumstances and could include investigations and participation in treatment programs. The most severe was immediate termination, usually included as part of a zero tolerance policy.

The sole agency that did not give employees a copy of the policies and procedures manual pointed out that their manual is not yet complete. Of the 29 agencies with manuals, 90% ( $n=26$ ) contained a statement describing the agency's commitment to a safe workplace. Of those agencies that have more specific *departmental* manuals, 82% ( $n=9$ ) contained a statement describing the agency's commitment to a safe workplace. Seventy percent ( $n=21$ ) of the directors stated that they had policies in place regarding employees who commit violent acts in the workplace. Two directors (7%) admitted that they did not know if any policies existed regarding violence in the workplace.

Seventeen (57%) directors stated that their agencies offered in-house training to enhance employees' knowledge about violence. The directors stated that training consisted of a variety of subjects, and was not limited to recognizing signs of violence.

Directors were given a list of potential characteristics of violent individuals and asked if their staff were trained to look for the attributes in potential employees and coworkers. Twenty-five directors (83%) stated that their interviewing staff were not trained to look for the given characteristics, while 37% ( $n=8$ ) trained their entire staffs to look for these characteristics in their daily interactions with coworkers. Several directors pointed out that while their staffs were not trained to look for those specific characteristics, they made their staff members aware of signs of aggression or substance abuse through informal communications. One director stated that the organization did not train for violence frequently enough. When questioned about training employees, 60% of the directors ( $n=18$ ) trained employees how to report concerning behaviors observed in coworkers. Ten directors (56%) stated that their annual staff training focuses on reporting violence; and often, this training is mandatory only for supervisors (33%;  $n=6$ ).

Almost all of the agencies (93%;  $n=28$ ) reported offering EAPs to their employees; with 25 (90%) contracting out for EAP services. Most directors described their EAPs as generic programs, covering anything from mental and emotional health to marital support and substance abuse counseling. Forty-three percent ( $n=13$ ) of the directors indicated there is a written policy to provide support to employees after a violent incident occurs. Two directors stated that they had crisis plans in place to assist employees following traumatic events, while others said they relied on the expertise of their employee assistance programs to help employees recover from critical incidents. Two agencies (7%) were unsure if a policy of this nature existed. Eighty percent ( $n=24$ ) of the directors identified using security alarms, while 27% ( $n=8$ ) said they use panic

buttons, and 47% ( $n=14$ ) expressed the use of surveillance cameras. In addition to these specific security measures, agencies identified the use of other techniques to ensure the safety of their employees and patrons. These included external nighttime lighting, the implementation of a security committee, instituting operational procedures that involve having two or more people closing facilities together, equipping athletic umpires with cell phones, and having a facility assessment conducted to see where security improvements could be made.

When asked to describe the process their agencies go through to terminate an employee, many of the responses suggested it depended on the severity of the infraction(s). However, 27 agencies (90%) mentioned using some variation of progressive discipline when dealing with employees who did not follow the rules. Once the decision to terminate had been made, steps were put in place to ensure a smooth transition. Some of the steps directors reported included having a police officer and/or a witness present during the termination, offering counseling services through the city's EAP, or having human resources perform an exit interview. One director reported that they changed locks and computer codes following a termination. Twenty percent ( $n=6$ ) of the respondents stated that their agencies assisted terminated employees. Six directors mentioned that the terms of the termination were negotiated in regards to compensation, confidentiality, and the use of EAP services. One director (3%) stated that they terminate employees on Friday, when necessary, since Friday is the end of the shift. All but one agency (97%;  $n=29$ ) did not specify a day for termination, and some made comments such as, "any day is fine," "depends on the offense," and "the sooner the better."

Two directors (7%) stated that they had to lay-off employees in the last two years due to budget reductions. In both situations, employees were given ample notice of the lay-offs and both cities assisted the affected employees. The assistance included transferring the employees to other jobs within the city, developing resumes, and assistance with relocation and job placement.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed interesting insights into the extent to which local, public park and recreation directors in Texas have prevention strategies in place to minimize worker-initiated violence. The prevention strategies most commonly used by park and recreation departments (e.g., using an application form, checking references and background information, interviewing applicants, drug testing, and distributing policy and procedure manuals) are not necessarily employed specifically to prevent worker-initiated violence. By redirecting park and recreation employers to focus on the opportunities these strategies offer in preventing worker-initiated violence, we may heighten directors' awareness of the potential for this type of violence to occur.

While just over half of the departments incorporate training in recognizing signs of troubled coworkers and in knowing how to report concerning behaviors, some directors responded that their training regarding worker-initiated violence was lacking or ineffective. "Most [employees] are probably not trained enough to deal with that [worker-initiated violence] to the extent they probably should be." "They [HR] haven't done any workshops to further educate because it hasn't really been a problem for us here." "I think they [the agency] try to make people aware of it [worker-initiated violence], but when it actually happens, they feel like they're flying by the seat of their pants." Only 17% of interviewing staff have been trained to recognize characteristics that may profile an applicant with violent tendencies, and 27% of all staff have been trained to identify similar characteristics in their coworkers. Several directors mentioned that such training is mandatory primarily for supervisory staff. A lack of training of front-line employees

may be cause for concern. Having a system in place and a staff well versed in that system may minimize the trauma of a worker-initiated incidence of violence. One director seemed to have changed his opinion regarding preparedness from, “We put on as much training as possible to deal with this [worker-initiated violence],” at the beginning of the interview, to, “Not prepared at all based on what we discussed. Sometimes you don’t realize these things until something happens or like this interview,” at the end of the interview. These statements suggest that educating directors and managers of possible prevention strategies may be a first step in incorporating them into their departmental practices. Ironically, one director’s proxy in the HR department explained that a major defense against violence is their training; however, he continued, “Training for workplace violence [occurred] a few years ago, but with high [staff] turnover, there is probably a large number of employees who haven’t gone through that.”

Only one department terminates employees on a specific day of the week, Friday. However, Fox (Bensimon, 1994) suggested that Friday may not be the optimal day for termination since it may not allow the employee to begin a job search immediately or to achieve some clarification and closure from coworkers and managers. Employers might be wise to consider the day of the week for termination to ease the transition for terminated employees. Directors seemed to realize that they must treat employees in a dignified manner when a termination is warranted. The news media often report cases of disgruntled employees seeking vengeance. Such headlines could account for directors’ recognition of the importance of being sensitive when terminating employees.

One agency (3%) reported using psychological testing for its applicants. This finding was consistent with Burgoyne's (1996) study, in that only 9% ( $n=3$ ) of her sample utilized psychological testing. Due to the controversial nature of such tests, it may be wise to avoid them. Although psychological tests have the potential to detect violence-prone applicants, the legal implications of using these tests warrant job specific consideration. Perhaps applicants for positions involving the use of firearms may be more appropriate to subject to psychological testing than those in non-security related positions.

From the descriptive statements in response to the question of how prepared directors thought their agency was to deal with worker-initiated violence, several directors appeared to recognize that their department was not adequately prepared and those departments had fewer than the average of 19 prevention strategies in place. One director whose department utilized 14 strategies stated, "[We're] not very well prepared. We've just not experienced it [worker-initiated violence]. There are some things that we need to do." Awareness leads to getting more prepared. Someone who realizes how far they have to go is going to be working on bridging the gap between being prepared in theory and in practice.

The finding that a few directors perceived that their departments are not prepared, but use at least the average number of strategies is somewhat encouraging in that they are aware that even more can be done to prevent episodes of worker-initiated violence. One director, whose department uses 20 prevention strategies, made a good point in stating,

“We’ve not experienced first hand a lot of that [violence], but that doesn’t say we’re prepared for it.”

Some directors who have at least 19 prevention strategies in place seem to feel confident that they are reasonably prepared. “I think that we are really prepared to deal with that [worker-initiated violence] with the training we receive from HR [human resources] and TML [Texas Municipal League] and to recognize the hot buttons that employees exhibit for workplace violence.” “[We’re] prepared, but maybe we could do more to get prepared.” The director of the agency using the most prevention strategies (24) observed, “We are prepared and aware of potential for workplace violence because of training and news, but I don’t know that we’ll ever completely prevent workplace violence. With 9-11, there is more of a heightened awareness of people to look for unfamiliar actions by people and inappropriate actions.” It is encouraging that these directors seem to realize that more can be done to prevent worker-initiated violence, even though they already employ quite a few prevention strategies.

It is particularly concerning that some directors perceive their departments to be more prepared than perhaps they are. Although they currently use fewer than the average of 19 prevention strategies, some directors seem to feel immune to the threat of worker-initiated violence. “We’re a small community; we don’t seem to have that problem [worker-initiated violence] here.” “They [human resources] haven’t done any workshops to further educate because it [worker-initiated violence] hasn’t really been a problem for us here.” Comments from directors indicating that their department is small and close-knit and that “we just don’t have that [worker-initiated violence] here,” are disturbing as



a justification for their feeling that they are reasonably prepared. More encouraging is that one director realizes, “We know it can happen, but we’ve been fortunate enough not to have dealt with it.” It also is worrisome that some directors seem to relinquish responsibility for prevention by delegating it to their HR or police departments placing little or no responsibility on the park and recreation department. “That’s [preparedness for worker-initiated violence] why we have an HR [human resources] department,” or “We have a good working relationship with our police department and brought them in anytime we suspected that we might have a problem. We utilized our personnel department for guidance anytime we suspected that we might have a problem. The combination of the two [departments] seems to put us in good stead.” “Most of us have police radios in our vehicles so we have quicker access to the police department than someone in the general public would.” Perhaps most concerning are directors who feel confident in relying heavily on the fact that they have policy and procedure manuals as preventive strategies. “We have a policies and procedures manual. We are prepared. We have several good policies in place. . . . We have things in our manuals that address these issues.” Issuing employees a manual is no guarantee that they know or understand the policies, nor that they can apply the procedures.

Underscoring the critical importance for attempting to minimize worker-initiated violence is the fact that eight of the thirty directors in the sample, plus all three directors in the pilot test (33% of all directors interviewed), indicated that their agencies had experienced instances of worker-initiated violence. This is particularly noteworthy, given that a 1998 Bureau of Justice Statistics report (Seymour et al., n.d.) states that only 44.2%

of violent victimizations suffered at work were reported to the police. In light of the frequency of reported incidents in this study, directors should be strongly encouraged to examine the potential for worker-initiated violence in their agencies and to implement prevention strategies to curtail this dreadful problem.

## Conclusion

It is unlikely that workplace violence will simply cease to exist, but employers can greatly reduce the risks and high costs associated with this complex problem. Park and recreation agencies cannot afford to sit idly by and wait until an incident occurs to decide how to respond. It is time to implement strategies to combat this force and protect employees. An important focus of future research should address the efficacy of prevention strategies. Identifying and assessing the efficacy of reactionary measures or response practices in dealing with incidents of violence is also an important consideration.

The findings of this study point to a need for agencies to increase awareness of the potential for worker-initiated violence and for directors to be more accountable for ensuring their agency has adequate methods for preventing or minimizing violence. Some states have enacted laws based on the recommendations set forth by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) aimed at reducing workplace violence (Loveless, 2001). Directors and agencies taking a proactive stance should be commended, but laws may soon be the impetus behind developing prevention measures. Given the potential for worker-initiated violence in the workplace, it is imperative to

establish a plan that can save both lives and financial resources, and create an atmosphere in which employees do not fear going to work.

Table 1

*Frequencies and Percentages of Prevention Strategies*

| <u>Prevention Strategies</u>   | <u>Yes (N=30)</u> |          | <u>No (N=30)</u> |          |
|--|-------------------|----------|------------------|----------|
|  | <u>n</u>          | <u>%</u> | <u>n</u>         | <u>%</u> |
| Does agency have one application that all applicants are required to complete?         | 30                | 100.0    | 0                | 0.0      |
| Does agency verify the information on the form?  | 25                | 83.3     | 2                | 6.7      |
| Does agency check with the applicants' references?                                     | 29                | 96.7     | -                | -        |
| Does agency check references for all jobs?   | 20                | 66.7     | 9                | 30.0     |
| Does agency check criminal histories?  | 28                | 93.3     | 1                | 3.3      |
| Does agency check driving records?   | 29                | 96.7     | 1                | 3.3      |
| Does agency check credit histories?  | 5                 | 16.7     | 20               | 66.7     |
| Are these record checks done for all jobs?   | 18                | 60.0     | 11               | 36.7     |
| Does department use psychological testing for your applicants?                         | 1                 | 3.3      | 29               | 96.7     |
| Does department conduct psychological testing for all jobs?                            | 0                 | 0.0      | 1                | 3.3      |
| Does agency interview applicants?  | 30                | 100.0    | 0                | 0.0      |
| Are the same questions asked to all applicants for the same position?                  | 29                | 96.7     | 1                | 3.3      |
| Does agency drug test any of your applicants prior to hiring them?                     | 29                | 96.7     | -                | -        |
| Is drug testing done for all jobs?   | 25                | 83.8     | 4                | 13.3     |
| Does agency drug test applicants after they have been hired?                           | 28                | 93.3     | 1                | 3.3      |
| Does agency have a policies and procedures manual that it gives to your employees?     | 29                | 96.7     | 1                | 3.3      |
| Does department have a policies and procedures manual that it gives to your employees? | 11                | 36.7     | 17               | 56.7     |

*(table continues)*

Table 1 (*continued*)

| <u>Prevention Strategies</u>  | <u>Yes (N=30)</u> |          | <u>No (N=30)</u> |          |
|---|-------------------|----------|------------------|----------|
|   | <u>n</u>          | <u>%</u> | <u>n</u>         | <u>%</u> |
| Does agency manual include a statement describing your commitment to a safe workplace?  | 26                | 86.7     | 1                | 3.3      |
| Does department manual include a statement describing your commitment to a safe workplace?  | 9                 | 30.0     | 2                | 6.7      |
| Are there policies regarding employees who commit violent acts in the workplace?  | 21                | 70.0     | 7                | 23.3     |
| Does agency offer in-house training to enhance your employees' knowledge about violence?  | 17                | 56.7     | 13               | 43.3     |
| Is your interviewing staff trained to look for these types of characteristics <sup>a</sup> ?  | 5                 | 16.7     | 25               | 83.3     |
| Are all staff members trained to look for these types of characteristics <sup>a</sup> in their daily interactions with one another? | 8                 | 26.7     | 22               | 73.3     |
| Are employees taught how to report inconsistent or concerning behaviors observed in coworkers?                                      | 18                | 60.0     | 12               | 40.0     |
| Does agency offer employee assistance program to employees?   | 28                | 93.3     | 2                | 6.7      |
| Is there a written policy to provide support to employees after a violent incident occurs?  | 13                | 43.3     | 15               | 50.0     |
| Do facilities have security alarms in place?  | 24                | 80.0     | 6                | 20.0     |
| Do facilities have panic buttons in place?  | 8                 | 26.7     | 22               | 73.3     |
| Do facilities have surveillance cameras in place?   | 14                | 46.7     | 16               | 53.3     |
| Does agency escort employees to their vehicles at night?  | 1                 | 3.3      | 29               | 96.7     |
| Does agency offer any assistance to terminated employees?   | 6                 | 20.0     | 24               | 80.0     |
| Is there a particular day on which termination occurs?  | 1                 | 3.3      | 29               | 96.7     |
| Did agency offer assistance to laid off employees?  | 2                 | 6.7      | 0                | 0.0      |

*Note.* Values may not add up to 100% due to directors' inability to answer questions.

<sup>a</sup>Characteristics included people typically withdrawn from other coworkers, fondness for violent books, films, television shows, fascination with weapons, loners who appear guarded, defensive, and hostile.

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